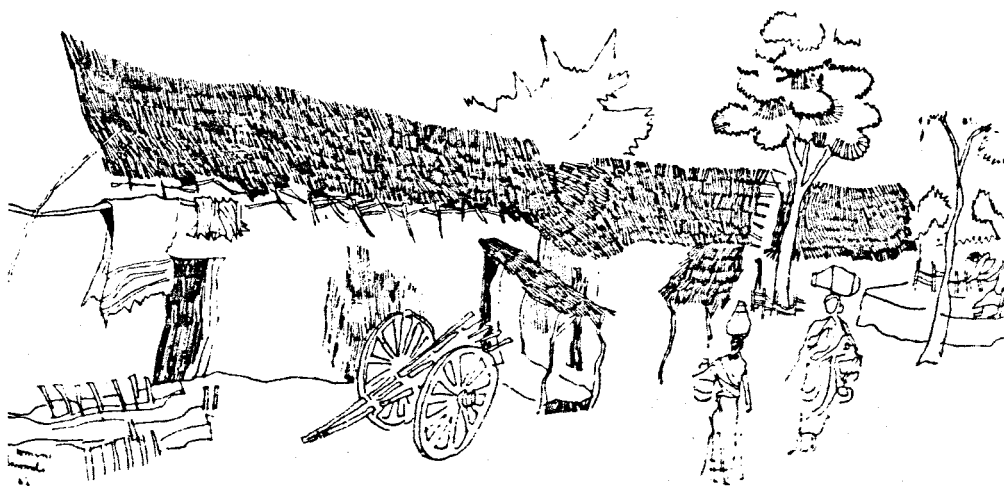


SABDASWARAPATA DANCE

The Tandava Aspect of Odissi

Sunil Kothari

Kumbhari is a small village situated in Sambalpur District of Orissa State. Populated by farmers it has a temple dedicated to Goddess Vrajeshwari. It was in this temple that we saw for the first time *Sabdaswarapata* dances performed by local artistes. Before proceeding to Kumbhari we had inquired at Barapali village about the Kumbhari artistes and we were told that one of the parties was touring but we might meet Bansi Padhan, the oldest exponent. This piece of information enthused us and we were ready to walk the distance of nine miles from Barapali. The weather was fine. Crossing the river was indeed an exciting experience. Accompanied by Shri Debprasad Das, a noted Odissi Dance *Guru* and Shri Maharana, local school headmaster who sang Oriya folk songs all the way to Kumbhari, we were greeted by beautiful Sambalpuri village belles on the banks of the village pond, carrying brass pots gracefully. Many a beautiful cameo of village life so lyrically depicted by Satyajit Ray came to life and we felt more than rewarded.

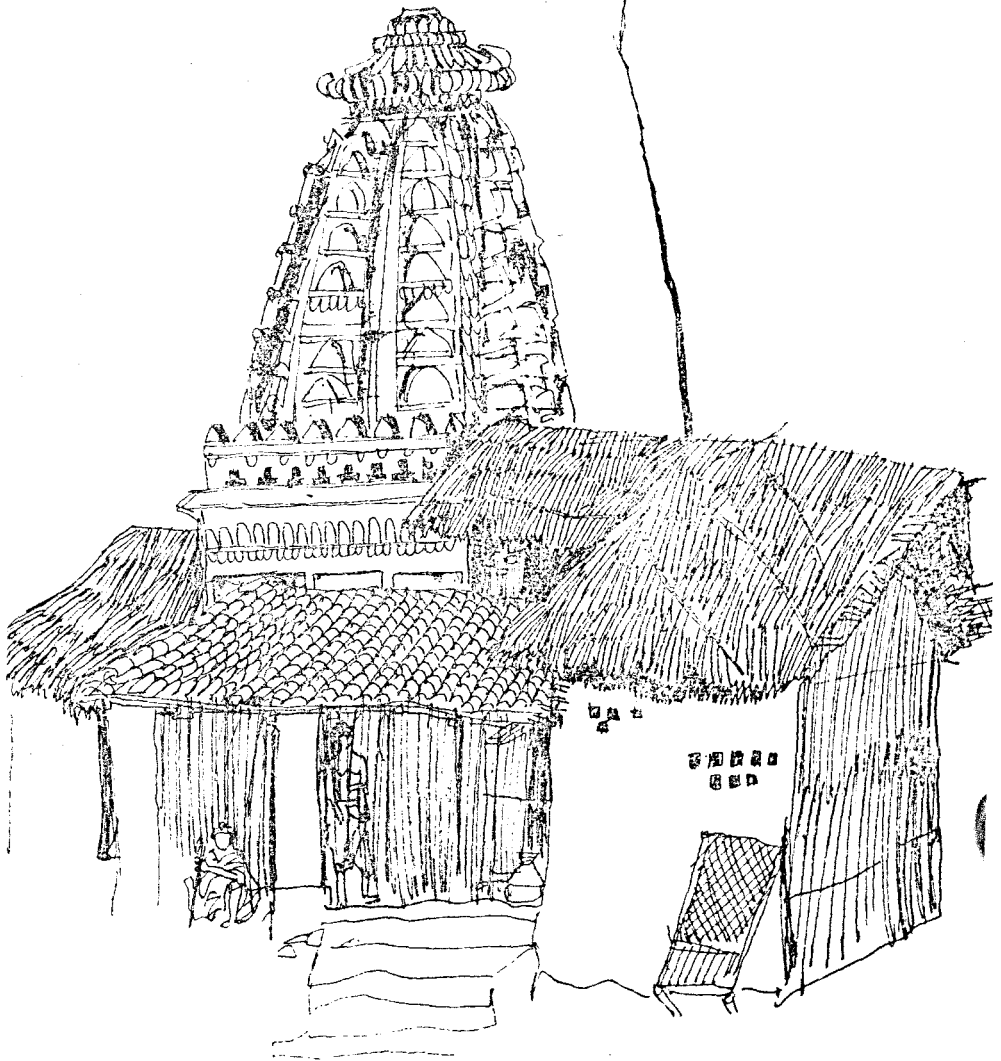


As we had not informed any one about our visit, there was quite a commotion when word spread that a party with cameras had come to Vrajeshari temple. Vinod Pithadiya, the artiste, collected a large crowd of children and elders when he opened his book and started drawing rapid sketches. The elders sent for Bansi Padhan and finally we were taken into the temple by the *pujari*.

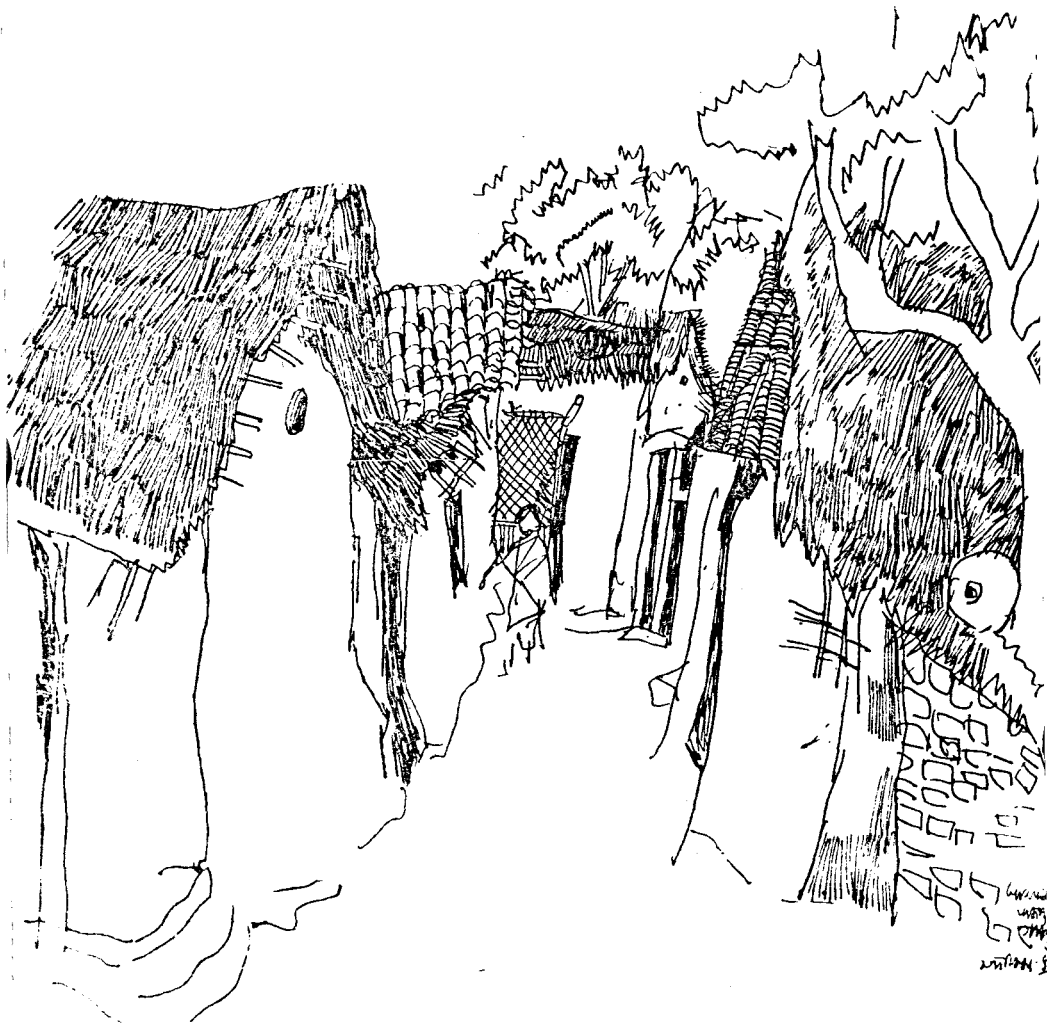
Tradition has it that a sadhu brought a palm leaf manuscript from Puri that contained the *Sabdaswara Pata* and this very manuscript—*pothi*—is worshipped to this day at Vrajeshwari temple. To this temple is attached a small Nata Mandap—dance hall for prayer and training in dance. Any one desirous of training must come to this Nata Mandap and offer prayer before the training. It is said that Goddess Vrajeshwari had taken Krishna to her breast, and since then she was called the *aji* of Krishna. The curious fact worth noting is that there is no idol of Vrajeshwari but only the peacock crown of Krishna is worshipped. There is also another manuscript nearly two hundred years old, written by Sadashiva Das on *Krishna Leela*. I could gather from the old *gurus* and the *pujari* that *Sabdaswarapata* formed a part of *Rasaleela* but it is different in its colour, execution and form though related to it. Mythology has it that Shiva and other gods watching the *Rasaleela* performance joined the group and danced. Hence we find *sabdas* dedicated to Shiva, Ganesh and Durga. There is another school of thought which maintains that *Sabdaswarapata* has its roots in the Saivaite traditions of Orissa.

The *Sabda* aspect refers to a Sanskrit *sloka* pertaining to the deity concerned. The repertory comprises of eight *tandavas*, sixteen *swaras* and sixty-four *pallavis*. Of these the artistes perform *sabdas* dedicated to Shiva, Durga and Ganesh. Rendering of each *sabda* is accompanied by a *sloka* in praise of the God and *abhinaya* is performed to present the temperament associated with the deity. While performing the *abhinaya*, the dancer uses *hastas*—hand gestures, *angikabhinaya*—bodily movements and *padakriya*—foot work. Quite a vigorous piece of dance, *sabda* is full of intensity.

It is said that after the *sabda* was performed the dancers used to fall into a trance. The passages of *nritta*—pure, ornamental dance prior to *abhinaya* expressional dance—closely resemble Odissi dance. It is full of abandon and verve. Both the drummer and the dancer can improvise during a particular *tandava sabda*. The *tala*—rhythm—is generally set to eight beats—*Adi tala* and is in *Chatusragati*.



It is surprising to note that these *sabdas*—prayers in praise of deities—bear a close resemblance to similar items in other classical dance forms. For instance we notice this in *Bhartanatyam kavutvams* which are lyrics with rhythmic syllables in praise of various deities. These *kavutvams* were part of temple rituals and were danced in praise of Ganesh, Kartikeya and Nataraja. Manipuri dances have similar dance pieces known as *mukhbol* and the same are predominantly *vaishnavite* in theme, dedicated to Krishna and Radha. Whereas in Kathak one comes across *kavita toras* in praise of Shiva as well as Krishna. It is indeed remarkable that each of these dance schools has developed



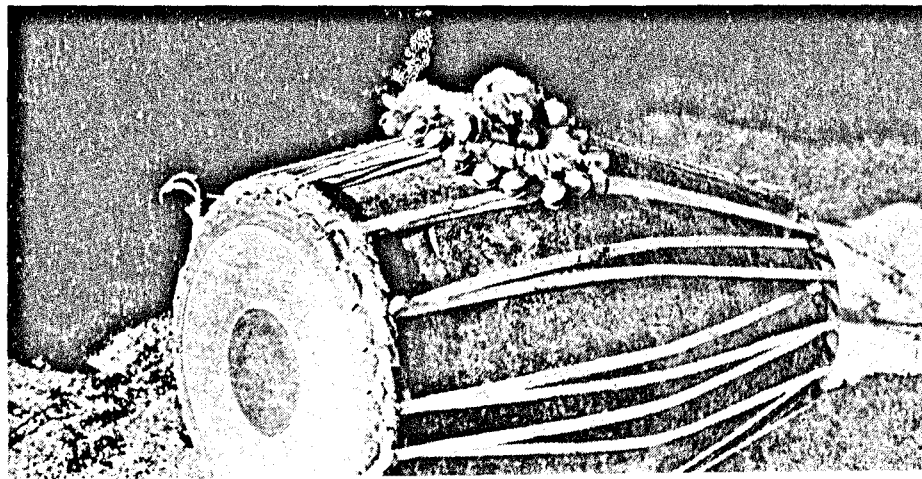
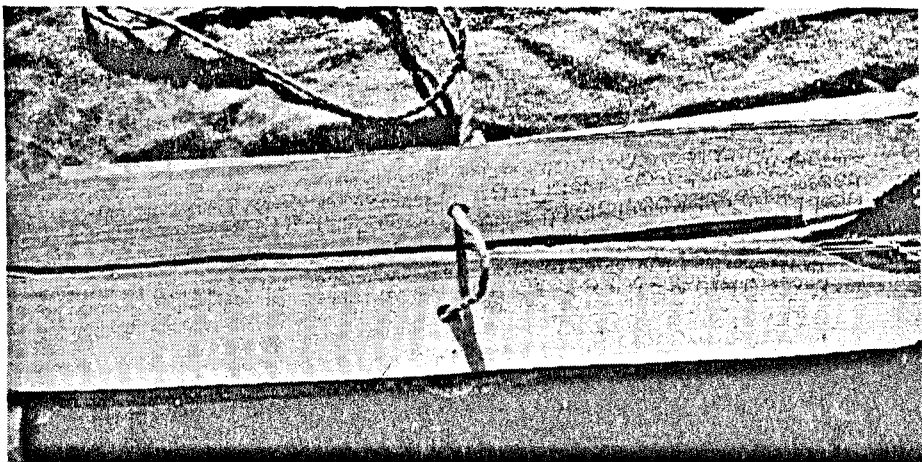
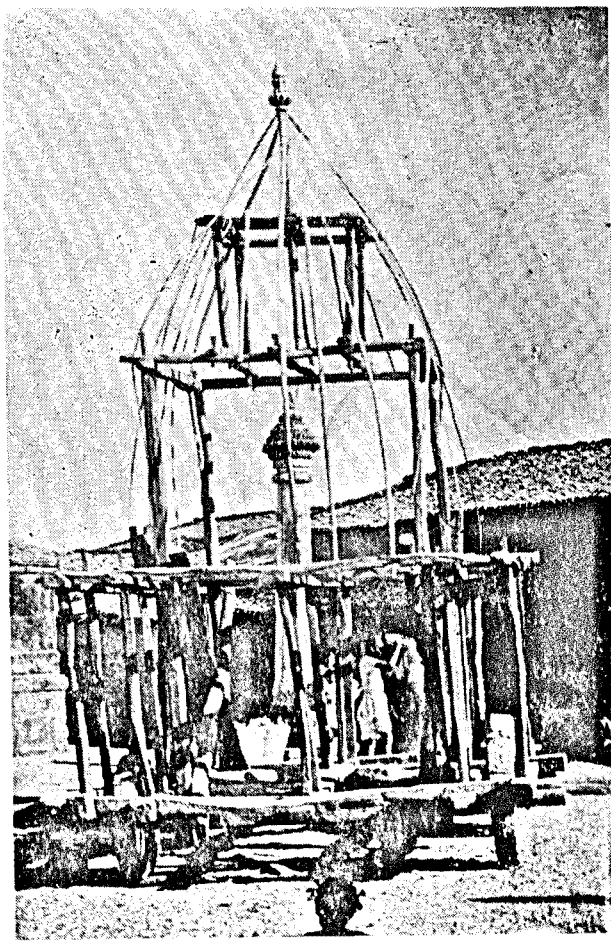
this aspect independently and it would be quite interesting to find out if any one school has influenced the other.

Besides the *Tandava sabdas* the artistes also perform *slokas* set to *abhinaya* and dances from the *Geeta Govinda*. This seems quite natural as Vaishnavism and *Geeta Govinda* had quite a hold over the

Photographs : Page 35 Left, Bansi Padhan, 60-year-old exponent demonstrating a basic position. Centre, A young dancer shows hand gestures in Sabda to Kali; Right, Exbad Bhramari, the spin on one foot.

Page 36. Left. Chariot and garuda pillar; Above, Palm-leaf manuscript of 17th Century; Below, Pakhawaj and ankle bells in the Natmandap of the temple. (Photographs by G. T. Sheikh; sketches by V. Pithadiya).





religious masses in Orissa. Unlike present-day dancers the artistes-sing the *sloka* in chorus and the onlookers, mainly the devotees and accompanying musicians, also sing it as a refrain. Under other extraneous influences *Sabdaswarapata* performers have improvised a few dance pieces incorporating the same in a wider *Rasaleela* performance.

The most important instruments in *Sabdaswarapata* is the *pakhawaj*. A pair of cymbals called *ginni* is also used for musical accompaniment. Previously entire *slokas* were played on the *pakhawaj*, a most difficult exercise in rhythmic manipulation. The fame of the late Samu Patel is legendary, we were told. Ghasiram Sahu was also considered as one of the best *pakhawaj* players. At present the aged Tushan Behra dominates the scene and his mastery over the instrument is amazing. Music seems to run in his family as he has learnt it directly from his forefathers. The various complicated *talas*, rhythmic patterns, that he demonstrated for our delectation left us spellbound.

The dances are performed by men only. The old *gurus* seemed quite concerned about the tradition as only a few devoted villagers take to dancing. Bansi Padhan who is over sixty is a farmer and is coaching some eight children in the age group of ten. These are the artistes who will carry on this tradition if they are not forced to give up their calling. Among them a young exponent, Jhadeshwar Das, hardly ten years old, is a promising exponent. These trainees are all farmers' children and work in the fields. They take lessons in the evening at Vrajeshwari temple and aspire to become legendary artistes. The *Sabdaswarapata* performances take place on religious festivals or on invitations on special occasions. The costumes are very poor as the party cannot afford to buy or design new ones.

So far these dances have never been presented outside Orissa State and in Orissa too it is practiced in a few villages only by some dedicated artistes who learn it in the spirit of religious worship and pass it on traditionally to those who wish to learn. It can best be described as the *tandava* aspect of classical Orissi dance. The present-day performances of the latter are essentially *lasya*—graceful and feminine in form and spirit, whereas *Sabdaswarapata* is virile and forceful both in execution and in spirit. The *padakriya*—foot work, *hastas*—hand gestures, *abhinaya*—histrionics and music all lend it a distinctly classical character though for want of proper training one can discern the crudities in its extant form. The '*bols*'—meaningless rhythmic syllables imitating the sound of the *pakhawaj*, are recited by the drummer to which the

dancer corresponds his foot-work. Rhythmic syllables like '*Ta Targud Taiyum Tatt Ta Thai*' etc. are repeated and they create a haunting audible image when suddenly the *sahitya* or the *sloka* is rendered, to be concluded again with rhythmic syllables.

It is necessary that immediate steps should be taken to rescue this important dance tradition of Orissa. For want of proper support and regular opportunities of performances it is facing the danger of extinction and also of degenerating into a crude form—a shadow of an exquisite regional classical dance style.